

**In The Pillory**  
**The Tale Of The Borgia Pope**  
**In Nine Crowded Chapters**  
**38 Splendid Illustrations**

By John Bond

European Corrospndent

The Fellowship Forum

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Mario Puzo, in his last book, *The Family*, said that he never met a gangster in his life... All the characters in his best selling *Godfather* book about the Mafia, were *inspired* by the life of Pope Alexander, his son Cesare, and his daughter Lucrezia!!

In presenting “In The Pillory” to the American public, The Fellowship Forum feels that it is rendering a distinct service by throwing new light on one of the darkest chapters in the history of Christendom.

The material contained in this volume was compiled by the author, John Bond, at the cost of months of painstaking research among centuries-old volumes to be found nowhere outside the “Eternal City,” where the scenes depicted in the work were laid. Many of the illustrations in “In The Pillory” have never before been given to the world, a large number of them having been made from original photographs taken by John Bond within the walls of the Vatican.

It is felt that the publication of this volume at the present time is especially opportune, as some of the

more advanced and diplomatic members of the Roman hierarchy have recently attempted to have the election of Pope Alexander VI declared fraudulent, in order that the entire record of his pontificate might be blotted from the pages of Vatican history. The reigning pope has frowned upon this movement, however, and it seems to have been abandoned, Pope and cardinals, no doubt, being unwilling to establish a precedent that might in future years wipe their own names from the roster of reigning prelates.

The reader will naturally want to know something about the author of this remarkable story. John Bond is an American citizen, and was for years one of the prominent authors and journalists of the United States. During recent years he has spent his entire time in Old World countries, as Special European Correspondent for The Fellowship Forum, which Patriotic Fraternal Newspaper publishes weekly news stories from his masterful pen. John Bond has established a reputation for absolute dependability in all his writings, includes in his articles only well established and absolutely verified facts, and after years of residence in European cities,

has gained an insight into Old World ways and conditions that makes his contributions to contemporary literature absolutely invaluable.

In the words of the author, “An institution like the Roman papacy, conceived in fraud and born in iniquity, was bound in the order of God’s law, to produce its crop of evil, and of this crop probably the Borgia Pope is the most striking example, though by no means the only one. Pope Alexander VI was the one who gave the entire New World to Spain, during the early days of exploration of the Americas. Thus the incestuous Borgia Pope Alexander VI becomes the fitting patron of the Knights of Columbus in their effort to “Make America Catholic”, which proposition is further strengthened by the action of the Knights of Columbus in selecting the Borgia Coat of Arms to adorn the walls of their Oratory in Rome.

One Romanist historian, in a recently published work, declared that the Roman Catholic church is “an accomplice in the crimes of the Borgia Popes if she does not take some official action to annul their election and obliterate their memory.” The book containing this statement has been placed on the “*Index Expurgatorius*” or List of Forbidden Books, by

the Vatican. Therefore, to the Vatican the record of “His Holiness Alexander VI” presents nothing to condemn. Indeed, the Church has within recent times, on two occasions, gone out of the way to honor the most villainous of her popes by restoring his apartments in the Vatican and erecting a monument to him in one of the largest churches in Rome. All this has brought the story of the Borgia Pope and his life and adventures into the limelight and has revived interest in the darkest period of the papacy.

As a tale of crime and scandal, the story of the Borgia, his concubines and children, his intrigues and secret murders, the brewing of the “cantrella,” the mystery of the “Infant of Rome,” and the final retribution of justice, constitutes a chapter of unparalleled interest in the annals of mankind.

Realizing its great value, both as an authentic document of history, and as an intensely interesting and tragic tale of engrossing fascination, “In The Pillory” is offered to the reader with the feeling that it offers an unbreakable link between the Roman Catholic church of past and present times, for Pope Alexander VI, known in history as pre-eminent

among Rome's scoundrelly "Sovereign Pontiffs," is still loved and revered by all the "faithful" as "His Holiness Alexander VI of Blessed Memory."

## PREFACE

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There is more than one Chamber of Horrors in the Museum of History, but none like that of the Borgia. The central figure is that of Roderigo Borgia, who as Alexander VI sat on the papal throne for upward of eleven years; around him are grouped his mistresses; a brood of bastard children; a retinue of henchman and an endless procession of victims. It was the darkest period in the life of Christianity, just before the dawn of the Reformation. Rome had become a sink of unspeakable corruption where, in the words of Dante, "Christ was sold every day."

The defenders of the Roman system in seeking to explain and palliate the "criminal age of the Papacy," declare that the career of Alexander VI, monstrous though it was, in no way "affected the holiness of his exalted office." They repeat the assertion that "one bad man in the chair of St. Peter is no argument against the Papacy itself."

It is right here that we must join issue with the apologists for Popery. First of all, Alexander VI was by no means the only degraded and monstrous

specimen of humanity that wore the lying crown with the three circles. If there is any difference between him and most of his predecessors and successors it is purely a difference in degree but not in kind. The explanation of the constant recurrence of men of the Borgia type in the papal chair must be found in the thoroughly fraudulent, unChristian and wholly political character of the Papacy as an institution. Examine the Papacy in the light of historic evidence — to use no finer or higher test — and you are bound to discover that it was conceived in fraud and forgery beginning with the fabled donation of Constantine to the bishops of Rome; that every step in its growth was a plain defiance of the Scriptures and the Apostolic traditions, and that its aims were wholly worldly and wholly political. A vicious and fraudulent institution cannot produce good men. Of course, I do not mean to say that all popes have been common criminals, such as could have been prosecuted under the provisions of the penal code, but I do mean to say that the taint of fraud was upon every one of them and that wittingly or unwittingly they were instruments for the debasement of Christian ideals. The pursuit of



money and worldly power, simony in one form or another, enrichment of their progeny or their relatives, the perpetuation of fraudulent practices can be proven against almost every pope who really existed and whose name is more than a myth. It has never been pretended that there is, or ever can be, the slightest warrant for such an institution as the Papacy in the revealed Word of God.

The Protestant Reformation dealt the first great blow to the blasphemous claims of the popes. The loss of their temporal power checked but did by no means destroy the political ambitions and projects of the Vatican. The nature of the Papacy has not changed — it cannot change. The blighting influence is still a tremendous and fearful reality. In His own time God will blot all its works from the face of this afflicted world and consign it to infamy first and to oblivion afterwards. In the meantime the greatest weapon against this enemy of mankind is the light of publicity. Romanism is a growth that cannot bear the rays of the sun. The plain, unvarnished truth will put it down every time. There can be no peace no truce and no compromise with the forces of the Vatican. The fight of the Reformation is still the

good fight but nowhere more so than in our own beloved Republic. The Papacy is reaching out or control of the schools in this country. It is encouraged by what it believes to be the indifference and the lukewarmness of Protestants who have forgotten or perhaps unlearned the art of protesting

Nor can it be claimed that Romanism with its destructive aims and tenets has changed since the days of the Borgia. Rome has never officially or otherwise condemned the Borgia, annulled their election to the “throne” of St. Peter, repudiated their records, or obliterated their memory. Quite the contrary. Within the present generation the Romanist church has erected a striking monument to the Borgia popes in one of the most prominent churches of Rome, Santa Maria in Monserrato, while less than thirty years ago Leo XIII restored the Borgia apartments in the Vatican. A monumental sarcophagus supposed to contain the remains of Alexander VI reposes among some of the canonized popes in the grottoes of the Vatican below the aisles of St. Peter.

Under the leadership of an Italian historian, an orthodox Romanist, a movement has recently been started to set aside the election of Alexander VI as a nullity and to blot his name and record from the Book of the Pontiffs. The Vatican frowned on this campaign set on foot by its own co-religionists, and Borgia is still “Alexander VI, the Sovereign Pontiff of Blessed Memory.”

In conclusion let me say that all through the ages there have been great and good men within the church protesting against Popery as a malignant excrescence on the body of the Christian religion. The great poet Dante, a thoroughly orthodox Catholic, a believer in the spiritual primacy of the bishops of Rome and in the “power of the keys,” consistently fought against the political aggressions and against the wild claims of the Papacy. He was driven into perpetual exile and condemned to “be burnt until dead” in case of capture. His famous book exposing the falsity of the Papal pretences in the forum of reason and history was ordered burned by the public hangman. A Roman cardinal of that day issued an order to open Dante’s tomb and have the body tied to the stake and given to the flames as

that of a heretic. The order was never executed because the friends of the great poet interfered. Even in modern days a respectable number of Catholics seceded from Popery and, as so-called Old Catholics, have their own churches in Germany, Switzerland, France, Holland, Belgium, Austria and other states of Europe.

Quite recently no small percentage of the Czechoslovakian people, the most intelligent among the Slav races, have rejected Popery and established a national church in the face of great legal and economic difficulties. They followed their martyred countryman, John Hus, who was burned at the stake as a heretic for daring to repudiate the absurd claims of the Papacy to universal dominion. They, too, recognize the distinction between Catholicism as a religious creed and Popery as a fraudulent and un-Christian institution. Our warfare is directed not against Catholics, whether they are of the Roman or the Greek or any other persuasion — it is directed solely and wholly against the Neo-Cesarism of the popes. Our quarrel is not with the profession of any religious faith but with a political system invented

and kept alive to enslave the minds of mankind and to destroy the freedom of conscience.

The Borgias are dead and gone but they are still brewing poison in the Vatican.

JOHN BOND.

Rome, December, 1926.

# **Chapter I**

## **The Invincible Alexander**

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A ROMAN MOB, A ROMAN NIGHT AND A PAPAL  
ELECTION.

RODERIGO BORGIA, THE WORST MAN OF HIS AGE,  
BUYS THE TRIPLE CROWN

HIS CHARACTER AND RECORD.

COWARDLY PRINCES OF THE CHURCH

“THE JAWS OF THE WOLF.”

A wild-eyed shouting mob surged about old St. Peter's, gesticulating with heads, hands and arms. The eager thousands pressed on toward the Sistine Chapel. All eyes were turned in the direction of the dimly lighted windows. Nothing could be seen there but a shadowy figure now and then moving about in deepest silence. What a curious contrast with the animation of the scenes below. Every corner of the square was black with humanity. The “pilgrim” stairs in front of the old basilica were covered with men and women who sought a little rest on its well-worn steps. The crowd had been there all day and all

night. The heat of the day — it was mid-August — had given way to the delicious coolness of the Roman summer night, but the multitude cared little for the gentle breezes from the river. Their impatience bordered on frenzy. Now and then the murmurs grew into angry roars. The men had come in running groups all during the night. New arrivals could be seen advancing every minute through the street of the Borgo (the papal district) anxious to take advantage of the early dawn when the sun was still friendly.

Before the clock struck six it seemed that all Rome was in attendance as if expecting some great event that promised them plenty of that “bread and sport” for which their ancestors had often shouted before the palaces of emperors. To feed well, to see a show and to get money without working have ever been the ideals of the Roman populace. Some ragged-looking beggars on the fringes of the mob set up the cry: “Give us a pope,” and quickly it echoed all through the square until the word “papa” shouted by a thousand angry throats was carried up to the windows above. The word sounded soft and foolish in the mouths of the dirty, unkempt mob. The

shouts continued to rise in irregular waves always breaking against the walls of the great historic chapel.

Up in that abode of so much rare beauty the cardinals were voting for a new pope. There had been eight ballots but not one of them decisive. A majority of two thirds was required, but the suffrages of the “princes of the church” were divided among many candidates. After every poll the ballots, pieces of paper that seemed more like parchment, were burnt in the open chimney. A thin wreath of smoke curled up to the opening on the roof and in an instant spent itself against the clear blue sky. It was the signal telling the waiting crowds that the papal chair was still vacant. There were demonstrations of anger and impatience, but in the end the disappointed throng made the best of it and again settled down to waiting. Presently as if by magic a great hush fell upon them all. The robed figure of a priest appeared at the window which all day and all night had been the cynosure of tens of thousands of eyes. The man stepped close to the ledge of the window, held up his hand to command silence, and then shouted something to the mob.



*“Habemus papam,”* he cried with all the power of his lungs. “We have a pope.”

The crowds had been waiting for these words for eight and forty hours and now abandoned themselves to a perfect frenzy of joy. Their self-control was gone in an instant. As crowds will on such occasions, they acted like very foolish human beings. They had come early and late and had excited themselves to the verge of hysteria, but now when the real news they had been so eagerly expecting was about to be proclaimed they were too delirious to wait for the final announcement of the successful candidate's name. It was all the stranger because they had come not to witness a manifestation of the Holy Ghost but because they were eager to plunder the residence of the new pope. To ransack and pillage the palace of the cardinal on whom should fall the choice of his colleagues was a very old if self-conferred privilege of the Roman mob, and the mob was now on hand ready to exercise it. The man at the window, though it was clear he had more to say, gave up all further attempts to calm the mob and make himself understood. For a minute he disappeared while the

pandemonium in the square rose to its height. Presently he returned with his hands full of great white strips of paper which with a great effort he flung far away into the crowd. On each one of these slips was written the name of the successful candidate: RODERIGO BORGIA. The name was shouted by the first man lucky enough to catch the fluttering message. The cry was taken up by the mob with transports of delight. No name could have been more welcome to the motley bands, for Borgia was by far the richest man in the College of Cardinals. With a rush like that of the whirlwind the crowds sped toward the Borgian palace and seized every movable thing to be found within its chambers. The cardinal, sure of his victory at the conclave, had removed every thing of great value but there was enough left to satisfy the savage plunderers.

In all the history of popedom there had never been an election like this which placed Roderigo Borgia on the so-called throne of St. Peter. Simony and nepotism had run riot in Rome for centuries but never until now had the triple crown been sold quite so brazenly. Twice before had Roderigo Borgia tried

to buy the tiara but each time he had been outbid and outmaneuvered. He was now past sixty. His career as a cardinal had been the scandal of Christendom for more than a generation. He had lived in open concubinage with many mistresses and was the father of at least a dozen children, many of whom he had acknowledged proudly and publicly, laughing at the flagrant violation of his vows.

It was known that he was tainted with a revolting touch of perversity beside which the mere indulgence of sensuality was a harmless diversion. For four and thirty years he had held the office of Vice Chancellor of the Holy Roman Apostolic Church, to which his uncle, Pope Calixtus III (Alfonso Borgia), had appointed him. He had built up his vast fortune by the sale of lying privileges and dispensations and absolutions for the most odious of crimes. Nor had he been content with mere fraud but had even hired criminal violence in his lust for gain. Insensible alike to honor and to shame he had disdained to play the hypocrite and had paraded his wickedness before the eyes of the world. None knew him better than his fellow cardinals and the people of Rome. Now as to the bribery which had secured his election, let me

quote from a Romanist historian, himself a priest, whose recent "History of the Popes" had the special approval and benediction of the present Pope. The name of the author is Ludwig von Pastor. I am quoting from pages 255 to 258, Volume III.

"Cardinal Ascanio Sforza (one of the other candidates for the Papal Chair) seeing that he had no chance of election lent a willing ear to the tempting offers of Borgia. The latter offered him the office of Vice Chancellor of the Church and his own palace beside the castle of Nepi and the bishopric of Erlau, yielding an annual revenue of 10,000 ducats as well as other benefices; to Cardinal Orsini, Borgia promised the two important fortified towns of Monticelli and Soriano; to Cardinal Colonna he promised the abbey of Subiaco with all its surrounding fortifications; to Cardinal Savelli he promised the city of Civita Castellana; to Cardinal Pallavicini, the bishopric of Pamplona; to Cardinal Michiel, the bishopric of Porto; to Cardinals Sclafenati, Sanseverino, Riario, and della Rovere, great abbeys and rich benefices. Counting his own vote and that of two friends of Sforza, fourteen votes had been obtained by this simoniacal

proceeding. There was still one vote lacking toward the required two-thirds majority... There remained an aged cardinal, one Gherardo, who was ninety years old. He was almost an imbecile. His friends and relatives were approached and they won him over for Borgia. Thus the election of Borgia was insured by his vote. The result was obtained by an unheard of practice of simony. The supreme dignity was bestowed upon a man whom the ancient church by reason of his immoral life would not have admitted to the lowest ranks of her clergy. The days of infamy and scandal for the Roman Catholic Church had begun.”

In the Sistine Chapel in the mean time the great ceremony of proclaiming the new “Vicar of Christ” was continued. Borgia was formally notified of the result of the election. His ambition of so many years at last realized, he yielded for a moment to the intoxication of triumphal victory. Gazing on the assembled cardinals, two-thirds of whom he had bought as one buys merchandise over a counter, he exclaimed: “Am I really Pope and Vicar of Christ”? As he uttered these drunken words was there none to speak for Christ and the Christian people and

answer the query of the Borgia with a firm and honest “No.” Among “these princes of the church” there were some who had abstained from voting or had even voted against him, though sure enough they were in a most pitiable minority. Was there not even a spark of Christian manhood among these cardinals? Did not one of them open his mouth and tell their criminal colleague that he was not the Vicar of Christ but the Anti-Christ? Was there not even enough courage in that “sacred college” to have at least one man seek to shelter his self-respect behind the protest of silence. The answer is an emphatic “No.” The institution of the Papacy had eaten too deeply into the vitals of the Christian faith and practice. The voice of the Christian people had been hushed amid the thunders of papal excommunications. Alexander VI only echoed what Boniface VIII had so boastfully asserted: “I am Caesar and Pope.” Paganism and the devil triumphed with. the triumph of Popery. If Borgia was a criminal every one of the purpled dignitaries that were present when he ascended the papal throne was his fellow criminals.

The cardinals showered their congratulations on him and Sforza, the man whose vote had fetched the highest price, solemnly declared amid the murmured approval of his colleagues in the purple that the election had manifestly been “the work of God, who had chosen the worthiest among the cardinals to represent Him and to guide His Church.” For once in his life Borgia played the hypocrite. Almost tearfully he spoke of his hope that the Lord would strengthen and comfort him. With a depraved sense of humor of which till then even his enemies had never accused him, he promised “to send his sons out of Rome immediately, to reform the papal court, to restore the religious orders to their pristine purity and to infuse new life into the Catholic world.”

*“Quod vis vocari,”* he was asked according to the ritual prescribed for the occasion. “By what name do you wish to be known”?

He flashed a look of pride into the eyes of his questioner and then answered:

“We desire to be known by the name of the invincible Alexander.”

The mob having returned from its raid on the palace of the new pope now came back to get his apostolic benediction. Again the ancient square was filled with human beings. There were cries for the new sovereign pontiff as the mob massed itself against the balcony. In response to the demand expressed with growing insistence there appeared upon the balcony a man apparently somewhat under sixty years of age, stocky in build, with a face that had traces of strength but still stronger signs of sensuality. His head was round, marked by an exaggerated tonsure. He was a type of the cold-hearted, self-indulgent friar such as you may see on many a painter's canvas or meet in the street of any Romanist city in less than an hour's walk. The man was Pope Alexander VI. The populace dropped on their knees and with a strong resonant voice "invincible Alexander" pronounced the Latin words of the apostolic benediction. It was the consummation of a great blasphemy worthy of the new "Holy Father" and worthy of his abject followers. The date is worth remembering, August 12, 1492. —



Even the cardinals that had voted for him were fearful about their future, not without reason, as the sequel showed. The others who had cast their votes against him dreaded his vengeance, for they knew he was unscrupulous and vindictive. Cardinal Medici, a rather stout youth, even then fond of the pleasures of the table, paled as Borgia glared at him in passing. Young Medici later became the Pope Leo X, who excommunicated Luther. He was now terrified at Borgia's triumph. Turning to his fellow Cardinal Cybo he whispered in his ear: "Let us get away, we are in the jaws of a wolf that will devour us all."

## **Chapter II**

### **The Pope's Shadow**

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THE SILENT PRIEST WHO PAINTED A PERFECT  
PICTURE

WHY WE HAVE SUCH MINUTE AND AUTHENTIC  
RECORDS OF ALEXANDER'S LIFE

THE MASTER OF CEREMONIES WITH THE CAMERA  
EYE.

Pope ALEXANDER VI was unfortunate in having for his biographer a man with a camera eye and unusual facilities for observation. This man was the papal master of ceremonies, a German priest named Burckard who had left his native land for Rome in search of preferment. By virtue of his office, Burckard was at the pope's side almost constantly. Alexander was far from familiar with the ritual of his own church, having other things to think about of a far more congenial character. When he found himself elected he gladly retained Burckard in office. He had no suspicion that this dry and quiet man had watched him with unremitting attention during all

the years of his pontificate. Still less did Alexander surmise that his master of ceremonies set down all he saw and heard in a diary as reliable as a dictograph and as fatal as a most circumstantial confession. Every day the pope unwittingly sat for his portrait until Burckard had produced the most intimate and faithful likeness ever drawn by quill or pen. Burckard's "Book of Notes," as he called it, has been the great stumbling block to the papists who have tried to rehabilitate the Borgia reputation. The big volume bears the unmistakable stamp of truth. Burckard never wrote in anger or passion. If he had any feeling in the matter at all it was one of annoyance rather than holy wrath or even simple indignation. He was a somewhat narrow minded person but extremely conscientious in all he said or did. To look in the Rome of the Borgias for a practical and ardent follower of Jesus was like looking for pure water in a cesspool. Burckard had no high ideals of religion. To him the whole duty of a Christian consisted in the due observance of formalities. In his own way he was quite sincere and his private life was irreproachable. These facts alone place him far above his daily environment. He was

shocked by the immoralities that obtruded themselves upon his sight almost every hour of the day and night, but he stuck to his post because it paid him well and kept him in the line of promotion. When the stench some times became unbearable he held his nose but that was the full extent of his spiritual protest against the sin and vice of the papal court.

There is one great blank in his “Diarium” or Diary. It is silent on the mysterious murder of the pope’s favorite son, the young Duke of Gandia. There are other gaps, but they are of no moment. There is evidence that the book has been tampered with. Thus the description of the banquet where fifty naked courtesans performed the notorious “Dance of the Chestnuts” for the pope and his daughter Lucrezia has been crossed out in heavy strokes of ink. In spite of this, however, the passage has been deciphered with sufficient clearness. No modern reader will care to wade through the huge volumes of indifferent Latin, in which the observations of Burckard are so minutely recorded. As a monument of biographical literature the diary of the papal master of ceremonies will always occupy a place of

high distinction. Its most precious quality is its authentic character which enables the reader to get as good a picture of Alexander VI as if “His Holiness” had been filmed with the utmost care by an expert with the moving picture camera.

## **Chapter III**

### **The Venus of the Vatican**

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THE BORGIA POPE IMMORTALIZES HIS CONCUBINES  
AS MADONNAS IN PAINTING AND IN SCULPTURE  
PORTRAITS OF HIS CHILDREN STILL ON THE WALLS  
OF THE VATICAN

THE FAIR JULIA FARNESE, THE VENUS OF THE  
VATICAN, AND MISTRESS OF ALEXANDER, NEAR THE  
HIGH ALTAR OF ST. PETER'S.

The Churches of Rome, small and big, are full of statues and pictures on walls, and canvas portraying popes and their mistresses and their progeny, not to speak of nephews and a great variety of other relatives. Of course these statues and pictures are not so labeled. By the faithful they are supposed to represent the Madonna and child, some angel or an apostle or one of the popular saints. The desire for fame beyond the tomb appears strangely powerful in the Eternal City, where human life seems so pitiably short in the face of the ages.

Alexander VI shared this essentially pagan longing for the perpetuation of his memory and that of his kith and kin. So strange and monstrous was this pope that he gloried in his shame and yearned to leave imperishable monuments to his own infamy. He thus sought to immortalize his first favorite mistress, the much married Rosa Vannozza, or as Burckard calls her, the “domina Rosa” — “the Lady Rosa.” Rosa brought much ill and woe into this world when she presented her lover with Valentino, later called Cesare Borgia, an inhuman monster like his father; Lucretia Borgia, deft mixer of poisons in her youth and a shining example of Romanist piety in her declining years, and Juan Borgia, a victim of his own brother’s perverted jealousy. The house in which she first lived with Borgia still stands on the corner of Via dei Cappellari and Vicolo del Gallo, facing the Campo de Fiori. Heretofore we have known very little indeed about the antecedents of this woman and not much more of her life outside of her adulteries with Borgia.

We know that soon after or perhaps even a little before Alexander’s elevation to the papacy she passed out of his life, though her children always

continued to visit her and she remained a well known personage in Rome. Until recently her tombstone could be seen on the floor of Santa Maria del Popolo, a church rich in historic names and memories. The epitaph recited a rather imposing list of personal virtues such as piety and a generous disposition to the poor. For some reason the inscription has been removed, but her resting place is known to the Augustinian monks who have charge of the church. Until the beginning of the last century masses were still being said in this church for the repose of her soul and that of her ill-starred son Juan Borgia, buried with her under one tombstone.

I may remark in passing that tradition by word of mouth lives long in the Eternal City, almost as long as in the countries of the East. Much of it may be gossip but there is always a vein of truth. The men who deal in books and pictures, following in the footsteps of remote ancestors, preserve many a curious and interesting fact which is not found in formal chronicles. Traditions especially attach themselves to certain persons and institutions or localities and live on vigorously from generation to generation. The story of the demons that in the



guise of ravens haunted the tomb of Nero until the evil spell was broken by the building of a Christian temple is told to the wondering tourist by cabmen who are unable to read or write.

Now in the case of “Lady Rosa” I have supplied many reliable data by tapping the oral traditions. I was led to an acquaintance with the site of a very old church which had been known as San Salvatore in Termis. The church was torn down some twenty years ago and no trace remains of its existence. Nothing in the neighborhood (Piazza Madama) even refers to it except the very short street still known as Via del Salvatore. This church was a favorite place of worship of Rosa Vannozza, who before and after her association with Borgia lived not far away. Shortly after the birth of Cesare Borgia she posed for an artist in the part of the Madonna with Cesare as the “bambino.” The interesting group was first set up in the church but later was taken out of the place and attached to the facade. There it stayed, protected like so many other statues and pictures in the open, by an iron grating. When it was decided to demolish the church the little bas-relief was removed and transferred to the curious monumental morgue

connected with the Church of St. Louis, the national French Church of Rome. In this strange reliquary of old disused or dismantled churches the statue was buried for many years.

The origin of the little work was well known. To strangers and tourists of course the most discreet silence was observed, but to persons who were seen to be familiar with the real facts the sacristan became quite garrulous and made no secret of who the models had been. The exquisite beauty of the group at last attracted so much attention and caused so many questions that it was removed and placed in the Church of St. Louis, where it is to this hour.

When you enter the church walk up the left aisle to the last chapel near the high altar and there you will find chiseled out of the finest marble a bas-relief of the Madonna and the Child. The photograph in the text, a great rarity by the way, gives but a faint idea of its exquisite workmanship. One look at the little statue is enough to convince the beholder that the woman who posed for the Madonna was not a professional model. The pose is stiff and forced, a labored imitation of popular models. As a piece of

sculpture it obviously belongs to the latter half of the 15th century.

There is other proof that the ancient Church of S. Salvatore in Termis was much favored and patronized not only by Rosa Vannozza but by at least one of her children, none other than her first born, Valentino Cesare Borgia. Cesare as he grew to manhood developed a craze for seeing himself immortalized in marble and on canvas. He was possessed of the notion that he resembled the Saviour. In this same strange annex of the French National Church, to which I have just alluded, there is found a bust of the Saviour for which Cesare furnished the model. In the rare photographs still existing of this bust one may read the legend: "Bust of S. Salvatore in Termis, supposed to be that of Cesare Borgia."

The bust was found in the niche above the entrance to the Church of S. Salvatore. Upon the destruction of the latter the bust was removed to the curious monumental morgue next to St. Louis Church, together with the bas-relief of the Madonna and Child. It is there to this day. As you enter the "morgue" you will find it high up in a niche near the

ceiling immediately on the left. No attempt is made by the guide or sacristan to conceal the identity of the model. Such was the mania of this, the most fiendish of all the Borgias, to be modelled for the sacred figure that he posed on one occasion for a head crowned with thorns. This bust, too, had in all probability come in the first place from the church of S. Salvatore, but was removed after the downfall of the Borgias and disappeared until strangely enough it was rediscovered on the walls of the penitentiary of Civita Castellana, where it may be seen to this day. The muse of history must have been in her most ironic mood when she permitted the face of Cesare Borgia to appear as the patron saint on the walls of a penal institution. Pitifully to relate, the pious folks of the town and countryside have made a shrine of it, surrounding it with flowers and candles and an iron grating. Likeness of both Cesare and his sister Lucrezia as well as of Alexander VI himself appear in various guises in the frescoes of Pinturicchio both on the ceiling of the church of Santa Maria del Popolo and in the Borgia apartments in the Vatican.

Such are some of the half-forgotten souvenirs of the days of Borgia and his tribe and his mistresses, more interesting to the student probably than to the general reader. There is one memorial, however, of a far different sort — not hidden in obscure corners, not strayed, lost or stolen, but standing within a few inches of the high altar in St. Peter. Whenever mass is said there the officiating pope must see the figure of a woman who slept quite often in the arms of another pope. I am speaking of the woman known in Rome as the “Venus of the Vatican,” the fair Julia Farnese, immortalized in dazzling marble posing as the statue of Justice beneath the bronze likeness of her brother, Pope Paul III, who owed his seat on the “throne of St. Peter” to the shame and crime of this same sister Julia. The monument was not built by her papal paramour. Borgia was dead when the artist molded that superb shape in all the carnal frankness of a pagan sculptor.

Borgia had ordered Julia’s picture as the Madonna (with their offspring Laura as the “bambino”) in one of the loveliest frescoes in his new apartment, where it may still be seen. She is the center of a very dainty “medallion” in that portion of the Borgia

apartments, which is known as the “Hall of Mysteries.” No doubt the brush of the artist has idealized the young girl just past twenty and a wife of two years. Although Borgia’s intimacy with her antedates her marriage, she still has preserved a touch of shame or shyness in her facial expression, of which the painter made the most. The artist who many years later fashioned her classic form in marble used for his model a very fine picture of Julia which, together with other portraits of her, is still preserved in the Farnese Palace. He was true to his art and true to his model.

His task was to use that model for a statue representing Justice. In that he failed, nor could any artist have succeeded. Being honest with his artistic conscience he produced the finest type of Venus to be found in Rome to this day, the many classic creations all included. Had he done nothing else, this speaking statue of Borgia’s last and most beautiful concubine would entitle him to rank high among the sculptors of any age. He has made the “Venus of the Vatican” breathe and live and cast her spell on every beholder, even the pious pilgrims who

gaze at the sight in wonder and in absolute, if blessed, ignorance of the facts.

There she is; bold, conscious of her charms, exulting in her powers of fascination, triumphantly unashamed. A head of intoxicating beauty but altogether sensual; the limbs perfect in their rounded symmetry. What a mockery to label this figure as the symbol of Justice. The flame in her right hand is well placed, she holds it daintily as if it were a bouquet of flowers, but the emblem of Justice seems to fall from her grasp because so shockingly misplaced. No other figure of Justice in all the allegorical sculpture of the world lies thus languidly and longingly on a couch. Thus she probably lay in Borgia's bed — one cannot help thinking that this was the picture in the artist's mind. An attempt has been made to harmonize the Venus of the Vatican with her austere and sacred surroundings by hiding her gorgeous nakedness in a blanket of grey lead. A fig leaf would have been far more decent, far more artistic, and far less suggestive. If she were shrouded like a woman of the Turkish orient, with nothing visible but the eyes, even then the poise of the head and pose of the

body would tell the story to every visitor : the story of the physical perfection of a brazen courtesan.



## **Chapter IV**

### **The Papal Libertine**

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THE GARDEN PARTIES OF CARDINAL RODERIGO  
BORGIA

PERVERTED INSTINCTS AND VICIOUS APPETITES

THE STORY OF A SOLEMN PROCESSION

THE POPE'S CONTEMPT FOR HIS OWN RELIGION  
AND ITS CEREMONIES

SALACIOUS SHOWS IN THE "APOSTOLIC PALACE" AN  
EVERY DAY OCCURRENCE

THE NOTORIOUS "DANCE OF THE CHESTNUTS."

Roderigo Borgia, cardinal by appointment of his uncle, entered early upon that career of monstrous aberrations which brought upon him the fear and loathing of the men of his own time and consigned him to the everlasting detestation of posterity. Had there been nothing more than excessive sensuality it would have excited but little comment in the Rome of his days.

The vow of chastity was a dead letter. Even the older cardinals had their “liaisons.” The humblest cleric was safe in forgetting his celibacy if he did not obtrude his failings upon the notice of the faithful. As to cardinals and other prelates it was notorious that many of them were regular visitors and favorites in the palaces of the prominent “cortigiane” of that age. These women were recognized socially by the customs of the time, their meretricious character was well known but their “affairs” and “romances” with eminent men in all walks of life were tolerated and often made the theme of poetry and song. What distinguished Cardinal Borgia from his contemporaries and colleagues in holy office were two things

First, the boldness with which he flouted the injunction of the church to be discreet and careful even if immoral and licentious and second, a curious and sinister delight in the degradation rather than in the mere possession of women. Even at this period of his life the sexual instincts of the cardinal were wholly abnormal and morbid.

The first typically Borgian adventure, a mild affair when compared to the dehumanizing debauches of

later days, occurred when the cardinal was in a city of Northern Italy “attending to some sacred functions.” Here the cardinal had been received by the best families of the town and soon was the centre of attention in the feminine world.

Borgia pleased the young women of Siena, a city always known for its frivolous manners. He suggested a nocturnal garden party, which under the starry sky and amid the fragrance of trees and flowers is even to this day a popular and delightful function. It was to be a happy and thoroughly unconventional party. Fathers, husbands, brothers, indeed male escorts of any sort were to be strictly excluded. The cardinal and his able and saintly staff would guide the affair in the proper way. We have a rather circumstantial account of this happy occasion.

The party began with a ceremonious and well-feigned display of decency. All the courtesies and proprieties were dutifully observed until the fiery red Tuscan wines began to flow more freely. Then the pace grew rapidly faster as the night advanced until in the early hours of the morning the unnatural and poisonous zest required by the sadistic nature of the future pope was added to the sum of gaieties

and every restraint and semblance of restraint was thrown to the winds. The end resembled and in all likelihood surpassed in its disgusting details the excess of paganism that marked the worst years of the decadent empire when the victims of lust and wine at the end of a debauch were gathered up by trusted slaves and doctors to undergo the necessary cures and repairs.

The affair caused a scandal even in that city and in that age. The anger of the male relatives of the young women was great and sincere, but Roderigo and his men had left Siena on their way to new adventures. These “garden parties” were repeated in other towns until news of them finally reached the ears of the pope, who had been petitioned by indignant fathers and husbands and by all the decent elements left in the communities to stop them and to bring the cardinal to his senses. The pope was Pius II, the man in whose election Borgia had given such valuable assistance. Pius II, himself an adventurer and opportunist and lacking in any fine sense of honor or proper conception of religious discipline, declined to remove Borgia from his profitable office of Vice Chancellor of the Holy

Roman Church. As some of the women and girls outraged at these garden parties were related to his own family, the pope had to take some action. He addressed a note of reproach and admonition to the cardinal, describing as particularly reprehensible the party at Siena, into the details of which he entered quite freely. The young cardinal's answer was little better than a polite sneer. It amounted to this: Even cardinals must sow their wild oats, when they are young, wealthy and full of virility. Borgia kept on with his dissolute life, provoking one public scandal after another and drew other rebukes from the pope, which he persistently ignored. As long as he could hold on to his office a papal rebuke more or less mattered very little.

When, after thirty years of licentious living, Roderigo bought his way into the papacy the constant gratification of his worst desires had made him a confirmed moral pervert. Though he had passed sixty, his craving for new orgies and new debauches seemed to have suffered no abatement. He converted the Vatican into a house of ill fame with a not infrequent overflow into the Church of St. Peter. It cannot be our purpose to burden these pages with

too much details on the subject, but a few hints may be permitted for a better understanding of the climax of Borgian, excesses, “The Dance of the Chestnuts.”

For our data on the conditions in and around the Vatican we do not depend on Burckard alone. There is an abundance of reliable sources. It appears then that the aged pope had a regular band of female performers — “an unlawful herd,” as one chronicler phrases it rather quaintly. The “herd” consisted of twenty-five young women and often more than that were in the Vatican every evening and were kept busy dancing and otherwise entertaining the Sovereign Pontiff “from the ring of the Ave Maria until 2 o’clock in the morning.”

These shows may have been the forerunners of the modern “revues” on Broadway, for interspersed with the lewd and lascivious dancing were “comedies of a gay and immodest character.” The audiences consisted as a rule of “not a few members” of the Sacred College, some of whom came dressed as cardinals while others came masked and had women with them.

On all these occasions the pope had a large reserved space close to the stage. At his feet lay a profusion of velvet cushions of various sizes. He followed the proceedings of his sacred cabaret with the most painstaking care and attention. If one of the dancing artists happened to make a favorable impression on him he would show his pleasure plainly and send for her. Thereupon the performer was summoned into the pontifical presence and there followed a petting party of two while discreet and intelligent servants placed high screens around the scene not to make the cardinals too jealous. Nor would the pope miss these entertainments when duty called him away from Rome. Thus it happened more than once that in various parts of his temporal domain His Holiness astonished the simple natives with unusual exhibitions of feminine charms.

The pope was a severe and expert censor in the matter of feminine clothes and gave a good deal of attention to the wardrobe of the young dancing girls who, according to one eye-witness, swarmed all about the “sacred palaces.” Nothing annoyed His Holiness more than to see long skirts on his favorite dancers. It is on record that he expressed himself

vigorously on the subject. On the anniversaries of his elevation to the papacy, Alexander made it a regular practice to shut himself up in his apartments and devote the day to joking and playing with the scantily clad females whom he summoned to keep him company. Burckard records the fact without comment as to the unbecoming character of the entertainment, but in a regretful sort of way mentions that the dispatch of official business greatly suffered through the frequency of these frivolities. He also remarks that “on the morning after” the pope frequently failed to appear for celebrating or even hearing the “Holy Mass.” When he did appear he looked and acted as if he was half asleep, which he probably was. In any event, he would on such occasions carelessly drop the “sacred” wafers on the floor and even step on them. The program of the papal festivities in the Vatican embraced more than girl shows in the way of relief from ecclesiastical hard work; there was plenty of gambling and excesses of every kind prevailed.

Alexander had a hearty and open contempt for the ritual and the ceremonies of his church, even those that were held to be the most solemn and sacred.



On one occasion when he was carrying the host under a gorgeous baldachin in a Corpus Christi procession, the weather turned bad suddenly, as it often will in Rome; and showers seemed to be in the air. The cardinals with him urged the head of the church to abandon the original route laid out and return to the Vatican basilica at once. The pope indignantly protested. The original route had been laid out in such a way as to enable him in all the splendor of his sacred garments to pass the window of Cardinal Zeno where his daughter Lucrezia and his mistress, the beautiful Julia Farnese, waited for him. Borgia was proud of the figure he cut in his pontifical finery and wanted to give the women a treat. The procession held to its original route and the women smiled down on the pope as he gazed up to the window of the cardinal's residence.

Alexander insisted on having Julia by his side on the most solemn occasion in St. Peter's. Lucrezia and her girl friends frequently sat in the chairs reserved for the reverend canons of the church near the high altar and "carried on in the most unseemly manner." Thus many great feasts in the calendar of the church were turned into ridicule greatly to the amusement

of the “Holy Father,” who on such occasion could not contain his violent merriment. So little did he think of the “Holy Mass” that he encouraged one of his jesters who would follow him as he left the church burlesquing the sing-song of priests and mimicking their motions. “This fellow Gabriellini,” writes Burckard, “was so bold and clever at this mockery that not only the Holy Pontiff but all the members of the Sacred College laughed most uproariously.”

The limit seemed to have been reached when his daughter Lucrezia went up into the pulpit of St. Peter’s with the pope and they entertained each other with jokes at the expense of the situation. Borgia, to whom the performance of his pontifical duties was an insufferable bore, was nevertheless quite insistent on having the proper tribute paid to himself personally. On the occasion of one of the high feasts of the year (Pentecost 1501), after the usual procession in which the pope is carried on his royal chair, he was acclaimed with wild enthusiasm by both the priests and the people. When he descended and as he was about to enter the Vatican a crowd of fanatic friars thronged around him,

kissing his feet and the ground that he had walked on, all the while showing their backs to the high altar. The demonstration was more than the master of ceremonies could endure. He rushed to the spot and tried to stop “an exhibition which was more befitting to Turks than to Christians.” The pope rebuked him severely, telling him to mind his own business and let the faithful honor their supreme pastor.

It does not seem that the advancing years dulled the vicious and lustful instinct and desires of the pope. He had completed the three score and ten when he arranged and witnessed the orgy known as “The Dance of the Chestnuts,” which has furnished so much material to the novelist, the historian and the painter. For our account of the affair we have the undisputed authority of the diary of Burckard, the meticulous master of ceremonies. The “entertainment” was conceived and arranged by the senile pontiff in person.

It is out of the question to report the full details of this “Dance” in these pages. Read even in the stiff and unemotional Latin of the “Liber Notarum,” “The Book of Notes,” it seems incredible that such things

could happen in the “apostolic palace.” The ill fame acquired by the “Dance of the Chestnuts,” it must be pointed out, is in the main due not only to the extreme lascivious features of the show but also to the fact that such a large “cast” participated in the proceedings. Massiveness always impresses the Latin mind. In point of mere salaciousness probably the “Dance of the Chestnuts” was only a little worse than other indecent exhibitions in the Vatican of Borgian days. In the curious language of Burckard the “chorus” on the festive occasion consisted of “fifty honest prostitutes, or women that hire themselves, and of unemployed courtesans.”

This crew, selected from the best material of the Roman underworld, was brought into the rooms of Cesare early in the evening. The apartment of Cesare was of course in the Vatican. There was a large hall which served for a banquet. There were tables for the pope, for his son and daughter and a very few invited guests. While the Borgia and their party sat at the banquet the “chorus of fifty” ate in the hall of the servants. When the banquet was at an end the tables in the dining room were removed.

The pope, Cesare and Lucrezia sat in a group on a sumptuous couch and presently His Holiness gave the signal for the beginning of the “festivities.” They began with dances for which the women chose partners from among the servants of the Vatican and “from among others who happened to be present.” At first some semblance of decency was observed. Indeed, to begin an intended debauch with an early outward show of respectability seems to have been the fashion with the Borgias. This, of course, was by no means a tribute to virtue or morality, but merely a clever and deliberate refinement of sensuality. The excesses and the unnatural excitation were cunningly reserved for the finish. The aged pope craved stimulation; he wanted to taste to the fullest every stage of the “enjoyment.” In this way he was carried along by the rising tide of sensual indulgence. The first orderly dance was of brief duration. Gradually the dancers of both sexes divested themselves of their clothing until with the increasing excitement of the dance they found themselves in a state of absolute nudity. When this erotic craze was at its height, the master of ceremonies signaled to the dancers to suspend and retire for a short rest.

Thereupon servants appeared carrying a large number of candlesticks. These latter were from two to three feet high and had evidently served for use at the altars of churches. The candlesticks were put in five straight rows, with just enough space between them to allow of the comfortable passing of a human body among them. A second group of servants following, placing lighted tapers of some size in the candlesticks. Another signal and the dancers, the chorus of fifty women with their partners, reappeared exactly in the same nude state in which they had left the hall. They ranged themselves behind the last row of the lighted candles and were immediately attended by servants who held bags filled with chestnuts.

The “fifty took the chestnuts and threw them in front of the candles as close to the lights as possible.” When the bags had been emptied, without waiting for any further signal, the members of the chorus and their partners of the male sex, dropped upon their knees and walking on all fours, began to search for and collect the scattered chestnuts amid volleys of obscene shouts of encouragement. The naked and heated bodies were

soon in a state of wild entanglement and then began the scenes which cannot be described. None was livelier in applauding and shouting than the pope and his daughter, then a girl of scarcely more than twenty. In the final stages of the orgy the most bestial of human instincts were running riot.

Burckard speaks of a “final assault.” While the men and women were half mad in their frenzied movements prizes were awarded by the pope to those performers who had distinguished themselves by the audacity of their excesses.

The disgusting “Dance of the Chestnuts” took place on the eve of one of the solemn feasts of the Roman Church, the Day of All Saints. It was well toward noon on November 1, 1501, when the debauch ended. The pope, who toward the end had given free rein to all his perverted instincts, was expected to celebrate mass in St. Peters, but sent word that he was ill. For four days he retired to his private chambers recovering from the effects of his effort.

The reversion to the diabolical practices of paganism at its worst, which is such an outstanding feature of all the Borgia regime, is nowhere more apparent than in these excesses comparable only to the

bacchanalian dances and the feasts of the Eleusinian mysteries.



## **Chapter V**

### **Tasting the Cup of the Borgia.**

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“THE “CANTARELLA,” DEADLY POISON OF THE  
BORGIA,’ THE SECRET OF ITS PREPARATION HAS  
BEEN LOST

“ETERNITY POWDERS” AND “TIME POISONS”  
RICH CARDINALS FORCED TO DRINK THE FATAL CUP-  
RAISING MONEY FOR THE ARMIES OF THE POPE’S  
SON

THE BANQUET OF DEATH WITH THE GRIM GODDESS  
NEMESIS AS AN UNBIDDEN GUEST

THE LAST DAYS OF ALEXANDER, AND HIS HORRIBLE  
END.

The Vatican looms large in the proverbs of the Roman populace. The dominant note is one of fear and distrust. “He who drinks of the water in the Vatican will die soon,” is a saying that is heard to this day. “Tasting the cup of the Borgia” means the sudden or mysterious passing out of this world into the next. Proverbs are not only crystals of wisdom but often reflections of history. The history of the

Roman church has been altered more than once by poison skillfully prepared and cunningly administered. In the biographies of popes and cardinals the tale of poisoning is not unfamiliar. Not all the poison in the Vatican, however, was made by hands. There has always been the deadly venom conceived in the mind and distilled to the world even at this hour in the pulpit and the press and the school. The Inquisition, the St. Bartholomew massacre, wars between nations and civil strife, ills and woes without number have come from the toxic laboratory of the Vatican, where they brew poisons for the mind in such infinite variety.

The doctrine that all power on earth is but a fief of the pope; that the state is and ought to be subject to the jurisdiction of the church, that there is no salvation outside of Romanism; that the pope is infallible; that the control of all schools belongs to the pope as of divine right — there you have some of the ingredients of that “leprous distilment,” which is decanted by Romanism in vessels of all shapes and sizes. Fraud, violence, deceit, forgery — an analysis of popery will show the presence of all these poisonous elements as well.

The Borgias were experts in poisons for the mind, but in the decoction of poisons for the body they have attained a mastery which has never been equalled in the history of the human race. Their skill and knowledge of the terrible art died with them; they have left to history the name of their dreaded poison, “cantarella,” but the secret of its preparation and the manner of its use are buried with them. Modern science has evolved toxicology, a special knowledge of poisons, but the “cantarella” of the Borgia Pope has baffled even the experts in toxicology. We can only guess at its composition by the symptoms of its victims. How the pope and his interesting family were able on the one hand to prepare the so-called “eternity powders” warranted to insure death in a few minutes and on the other hand contrived the manufacture of so-called “time poisons” which killed within a desired period will never be known.

It is now generally believed that the base of the “cantarella” was arsenic. Arsenic in its pure form, unless taken in large doses, rarely kills outright. Indeed the human system has shown itself capable of absorbing small doses of arsenic regularly without

any apparent evil effect. There is a province in Austria known for its “arsenic eaters.” They are hardy mountaineers who after years of regular use of the drug, even in quantities far beyond a medicinal dose, seem to enjoy excellent health. The attempt to kill a human being with one dose of arsenic in its pure form results in symptoms at once distressing and characteristic.

The Borgias, therefore, disdained the use of arsenic in such form as something too coarse and too obvious. They discovered that when arsenic is mixed with inorganic matter it loses none of its lethal qualities, but kills more unostentatiously. In this way they learned the art of making doses of varying strength — in other words the “time poisons.” Much, of course, depended on the matter of solution and mixture with wine, milk and other liquids. According to one report the raw material of the “cantarella,” or its original crude form, was obtained in this manner. Some animal, by preference a pig, was slaughtered and disembowelled. The entrails were then freely sprinkled with pure arsenic. The poison checked but did not entirely arrest the ensuing process of

putrefaction. After allowing a certain time to elapse, the semi-putrid matter was squeezed out. The juice thus obtained became far more deadly than arsenic in its pure form but continued just as tasteless. All now depended on the size of the doses, the manner of mixing it, and the best way of administering.

To ascertain the exact effects of given quantities and given mixtures the pope and his son Cesare experimented for some time on living animals.

These experiments being not entirely satisfactory, they next tried out their preparations on human beings. It may have been this diabolical work which gave them that pre-eminence that has associated the word poison with the name of Borgia in the minds of all readers of history. The victims, always of humble origin, having served their purpose, were flung into the Tiber through the secret passageways in the Castel S. Angelo. Many of these subterranean openings exist in the historic building to this day, but others have been walled up since it passed out of possession of the popes.

We have no intention to catalogue the crimes of the Borgias, for even if we were to confine ourselves to their murders by means of the "cantarella" the

record would prove far too bulky for a volume of so modest a size. We will, therefore, only take up four well authenticated cases. In three cases the “cantarella” worked to perfection, in the fourth the intended victim, through some mysterious turn of luck, escaped, while the poisoners, i.e., the pope and his eldest son, were both caught in the toils of fate. Alexander VI died shortly after, the involuntary victim of his own poison, while his son was brought to the verge of the grave. Of this last case we propose to speak later at some length.

It must be pointed out here that the Borgia generally reserved the “cantarella” for their “friends” and even relatives. Men of wealth and power close to the papal court, preferably cardinals or influential churchmen, were removed by what one of them facetiously called the “liquor of succession.” The estates of victims always passed quickly into the hands of the pope or his son or daughter.

The pope bitterly hated the cardinals who had sold themselves to him to insure his election. This feeling was not due of course to any promptings of conscience. Borgia hated them because of his belief that the price he had paid for their votes had been

too high. The simplest way to get back the money and the lands and the offices he had used as bribes was to put the offending “princes of the church” out of the way. For this purpose the “cantarella” was eminently the straightest means.

The killing need not be done too openly. His meditated malice had centered on Cardinals Orsini and Michiel. They were now the two wealthiest members of the Sacred College. Upon some trivial pretext Orsini was taken to the Castel S. Angelo, which in those days might well have been likened to the Tower of London. Orsini had hidden his wealth away and a swift death might have spoiled the proposed robbery of the dead. The cardinal was therefore treated to “time poisons.” The doses at first were small and produced only the earliest stages of arsenic poisoning, an inflammation and compression of the alimentary canal. This was enough to alarm the relatives who, Alexander hoped, would soon appear with offers to give up the cardinal’s treasures to save his life. None appeared, however, but the cardinal’s aged mother, who had heard that her son had been taken ill and was suffering from fits of vomiting. She went to the Holy

Father with a rare and most precious pearl, offering to exchange it for the pope's permission to have the food for the imprisoned cardinal supplied from her own kitchen. Alexander VI accepted the pearl and thereafter had the poison put in the food sent by the mother. The cardinal lingered for a week but pressure on the family failed to bring the desired results and the angry pope finally sent him the Borgia cup full of the fatal drops. He was given two hours to drain it. When at the end of that time the papal jailer found the cup untouched there appeared another visitor in the cardinal's cell — the most dreaded of all the secret executioners of the pope, his countryman from Spain, the cruel Michelotto.

Now the specialty of Michelotto was not poison but strangling. The cardinal chose the poison and died within the hour. The other cardinal who had been among those who were bought was Michiel. He was poisoned in his home through the treachery of his own servant. The pope had bribed this man who mixed the slower variety of the "cantarella" with his master's food and drink. Cardinal Michiel endured the four painful stages of the "cantarella": violent compression of the alimentary canal, appearance of



a horrible rash, “the most vile and loathsome crust,” an undermining of the whole nervous system, and finally a fatty and rapid degeneration of the heart. He died in four days.

Curiously enough the treacherous servant, bribed by the pope, was afterward arrested, made a full confession and was burned at the stake. This of course happened after the death of Alexander. Cardinal Ferrari was poisoned in exactly the same way, the pope corrupting a young priest in the cardinal’s household. The symptoms were much the same, death ensuing at the end of the second day after the first dose. The estates of the dead churchmen were immediately seized by Borgia, but were in part restored to the heirs after the election of a new pope. The young priest who had served as the pope’s tool was also arrested some years later, made a full confession and suffered death by burning — the penalty for poisoners in that age.

It may be well to mention in passing that the vast sums which the pilgrims of the “Holy Year” of 1500 had brought to Rome and the huge tax that had been collected by the Vatican as a tribute for the prosecution of the wars against the Turks had all

found their way into the hands of Cesare Borgia, who constantly needed new funds for the maintenance of his armies. It was the dream of both of the pope and his son to advance the fortune of Cesare until he was to become the ruler of all Italy. The money realized from the seizure of the estates of the poisoned cardinals all had gone to satisfy the demands of the mercenaries of Cesare. A new victim was needed and was soon found.

For some time the pope had had his eye on the immense wealth of another cardinal, Adrian by name. The wealth of Adrian was mostly liquid, just what Cesare wanted most. Adrian owned an estate on Vatican Hill, where the pope was a frequent visitor. Not all of the facts in the tragedy which was enacted on that estate have come down to us. The events occurred in the early part of August, in the year 1503, not long before the date of the anniversary of Borgia's election, which had he lived would have been the eleventh.

Before relating the happenings on the fatal summer evening let us take a rapid glance at the state of the Borgia fortunes at this time.

The cunning political genius of Cesare Borgia had maneuvered the pope into a position of great advantage. France and Spain were bidding for the support of Alexander, who through his son now controlled a not inconsiderable portion of Italian territory. All indications pointed to a further increase of Cesare's conquests and to a corresponding augmentation of the papal power in the politics of Europe. It is not too much to say that the Borgia were on the road to absolute dominance of the world when they plotted to poison and rob the aged Cardinal Adrian of Corneto. Fortune seemed to have singled them out for her favorites at every turn. Though now well past sixty, Alexander was in robust health and gifted with an almost incredible capacity for enjoyment. He seemed at his zenith rather than at his decline. As to Cesare, in all human probability he was destined to fill a great part in the annals of mankind. He had reduced most of the petty rulers of Italy to obedience and had taken their lands from them. Nothing seemed capable of stopping his career of triumph. If he could hold his armies together another month or two he and his father would be in a position to gain the support of

the great monarchs of the world for the complete subjugation of Italy and its surrender to the Borgia ambitions.

Like many a smaller criminal, the pope had resolved that this poisoning should be his last and that with the cardinal's wealth in his hands he need no longer stoop to the common crime of murder for money. We do not know how the dinner in the cardinal's villa had come about, but it appeared rather probable that the pope and Cesare had diplomatically invited themselves and that from the very outset their plan had been very cleverly conceived. Unless some circumstances altogether unforeseen and unforeseeable intervened, the old cardinal must soon be in the great beyond and his money in the hands of the pope and his son. Adrian had invited a number of distinguished guests, whether with or without the pope's knowledge we do not know. If he asked the pope's consent it is most likely that he received it, for a refusal might have awakened suspicion. Guicciardini, a contemporary historian and usually most painstaking and reliable, relates that Cesare Borgia some hours ahead of the dinner sent his personal messenger to

the cardinal's villa with several bottles of wine mixed with suitable doses of the "cantarella."

The messenger had instructions to hand the bottles to the head steward of the cardinal's household and to enjoin the latter not to open the bottles under any circumstances until after Cesare's arrival at the banquet. According to all accounts the day was extremely hot. Alexander, tortured by the heat and a great thirst, arrived at the villa some time before the banquet, which was set for a late hour. The cardinal being out, he was received by the head steward. The pope complained of the weather and asked for a glass of wine. The head steward thinking that the wine sent by Cesare was undoubtedly some very fine brand probably intended for the pope in any event, disregarded the injunction of Cesare's messenger and opened the forbidden bottles. He filled the pope's glass and while the latter was sipping the wine, Cesare appeared and unaware of the true state of affairs, drank likewise of the wine that had been served to his father. The trouble with this version is that it does not account for the sickening of the cardinal and his guests at the

banquet, which must have taken place not long afterwards.

There is another version which may seem more plausible. According to this account, the cardinal had received a warning and knew what the Borgia intended to do. He investigated and was led to suspect his steward. Putting the latter to a gruelling cross examination and threatening to have him hung on the spot if he did not make a clean breast of the affair, the cardinal obtained a full confession. Having learned of the bribe which his servant had accepted from the Borgia he doubled the amount upon condition that he, the steward, put the poisoned wine before the pope and Cesare. We know that the pope and his son did drink of the poisoned wine in quantities, which proved fatal to the pope and almost fatal to the son.

The fact that the cardinal himself was poisoned in a less dangerous degree remains to be explained. It is quite possible that the steward in his nervous fear made a mistake all around and had lost the means of distinguishing the poisoned wine from the other. The cardinal probably owed his better fortune to the general suspicion which must have filled his mind

and which no doubt made him partake very sparingly of any of the wines offered at his table.

Unfortunately we get no help from Burckard's diary, which is a blank between the months of February and August, 1503. However, the poisoning of the cardinal, the Borgias, father and son, and the other guests at the banquet are sufficiently proven from other sources. We know from the dispatches of various ambassadors to their masters that the pope and Cesare immediately after the banquet showed unmistakable signs of poisoning. Both complained of fever and both had vomiting spells. The pope appeared terribly depressed. The next day the vomiting spells increased in violence and the discharges were mixed with gall and greenish substances. There follows a passing improvement, but presently the gravest symptoms reappear and the doctors cut and bleed the pope. The frightful heat, the exhaustion consequent upon the vomiting and later upon the letting of blood rapidly exhausted the vitality of the pope, who was then over seventy-three years old. As the death of Borgia now seemed but a matter of hours, orders were issued that no one be allowed to leave the Vatican. In spite of the

prohibition, a number of persons succeeded in leaving the place and taking great treasures with them. Shortly before he expired, the pope fell into a coma and was unable to remember anyone, not even Cesare and Lucrezia. All this time Cesare suffered much in the same way as the pope, but his youth was in his favor and he passed through a very painful crisis to escape with his life.

When it is remembered that Cardinal Adrian was likewise poisoned, though in some way much less severely, it is obvious that the “cantarella” had been at work at the banquet and that in all human probability it had been introduced by the Borgia or their servants. The symptoms of the “cantarella” with its arsenic base are conclusive as to the nature of the illness. Had any further proof been wanting, however, it was soon furnished in most fearful fashion. The pope had died without regaining consciousness.

His body was washed and dressed and was placed in a chamber of his apartments. Two candles only were provided; there were no prayers and no night vigils. The next morning, according to custom, the dead body was carried into St. Peter's. The cardinal



who had charge of the transportation was afraid that some personal enemy might want to disfigure the corpse, which would have been atrocious, of course, but strictly within the etiquette of the Italian “vendetta,” or revenge. To make sure that nothing untoward would happen the cardinal ordered the body placed in a side chapel with a strong and high railing made of iron. And now appeared a last and most terrible symptom of the poison to which the pope had given his name. While a slight discoloring of the face had been noticed before death, a ghastly black crust now began to form on the corpse.

I hesitate to translate the description Burckard has given of the state of the body as it lay in state in the basilica. In its painstaking details and its crudeness it is scarcely fit to be placed before the modern reader. He says that the pope looked “like a very black negro *“morus nigerrimus”* — that “the mouth was wide open, the nose heavily swollen, the tongue split in two, the parts hanging over the lips \* \* \* all of which was so horrible that no one would ever have believed it was the same man.” The ambassador of Venice writes home to this effect: “Today the pope, according to custom, was carried to St. Peter’s and

shown to the people, but it was the most loathsome and the most monstrous and frightful corpse that had ever been seen. It had neither the form nor the aspect of a human being.” Another ambassador writes that the body was horribly swollen and entirely black, “many think that he died of poison.” Another eyewitness declares that the body looked “more black than the devil.” Ghastly as the spectacle must have been in the day time it was even more insufferable at night in the yellow flickering and smoky light of the candles. Without further ceremony and long before the usual time, the remains of the pope were turned over to some carpenters and laborers to be put into a coffin. The men went about their work, as Burckard says, “joking and cursing.” When it was found that the coffin was somewhat small for the distended proportions of the deceased pontiff they kicked and pushed the remains until they were able to close the coffin and nail it down. Such was the end of Roderigo Borgia, known among the popes as Alexander VI. Here we may well leave him forever.



## **Chapter VI**

### **The Infant of Rome**

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THE PAPACY REACHES ITS LOWEST DEPTHS  
DOCUMENTS UNDER THE SEAL OF ST. PETER  
PROCLAIM AN UNSPEAKABLE DEGRADATION  
REVOLTING INTIMACIES IN THE CHAMBERS OF THE  
“APOSTOLIC PALACE”  
LUCREZIA BORGIA MORE SINNED AGAINST THAN  
SINNING!

According to Dante there is a “bad pocket” in the depths of hell which forbids close approach. The rims of the pocket are encrusted with foul matter, a noisome stench fills the air. To view the wretched tribe within and below, all covered with horrible filth, Dante stood on a bridge not too close. From this safe distance he gazed at the vile abode. There is a chapter in the life of the Borgia Pope which, too, may not be viewed too closely.

The facts in the case are notorious. Indeed the record is made up chiefly of two official rescripts issued by the pope. The documents may still be

found in the archives of the Vatican. One begins with the words, “Illegitime genitos,” the other with “Spes futurae.” Both bear the date, September 1, 1501.

The two bulls deal with the same subject, i. e., the parentage of a male child three years old and known even then as John Borgia, and since then as the “infante romano,” or the “Infant of Rome.” In the first bull, which was published immediately and incorporated into the public records of the Vatican this little boy “about three years old” was described as the illegitimate son of Cesare Borgia and a “mulier soluta,” or marriageable woman.

The second bull was to be deemed confidential (*Spes futurae*); the implication of course being that it was to be held in reserve until the rights of all the parties in interest would seem to require its official promulgation. Such proceedings were by no means new in papal practice and often, as in the present case, led to complications and mystifications.

In this second document, intended for the private records of the Vatican, the pope declares that he himself is the father of the “aforesaid three-year-old

child,” which fact the bull goes on to say, “for certain reasons we did not indicate in the preceding document.” “If,” the papal rescript No.2 continues, “in the future the said child is found to be designated as the child of Cesare in any papers or acts, the rights of the child shall not thereby be allowed to suffer, for in truth he was not born to Cesare but to me and the same “marriageable woman.”

This mysterious little boy had all the time lived in the very bosom of the Borgia family and evidently was the object of great affection on the part of the pope, and as will appear presently, of Lucrezia Borgia. No records exists of his birth or his baptism. Judging by the references in the bulls mentioned, the child must have been born in the early part of 1498, about five years after Borgia had been crowned as Pope Alexander VI.

Leaving aside for the present the strange claim and counterclaim as to the boy’s paternity, many theories have been advanced as to who the mother might have been. It has been contended that she was a woman of the people who had attracted the vagrant and uneasy appetite of the aged pontiff.

This contention seems improbable because the number of children credited to Alexander was large and he was not in the habit of dealing with their future in papal bulls and public records. The pope, it is true, always found ways and means of providing for his numerous progeny, but never showed such deep solicitude as he exhibited in this case. It may well be assumed, therefore, that both the mother and the child must have had some very strong and special hold upon his feelings. One of his biographers has expressed the belief that the child thus strangely cared for by Alexander was the result of his love affair with Julia Farnese, but it is well known that Julia's child was a girl, though there have been reports that the "Venus of the Vatican" bore him more than one child. There is no reason why Alexander should have singled out a particular child of Julia, of whose charms by the way he had seemed to tire some time before the birth of the mysterious boy. Besides Julia was a married, not a marriageable woman.

Why then all this maneuvering as to the paternity, first declaring that Cesare was the father and then explaining that the declaration was only a feint to

serve some unknown purpose and that he, the pope, was the real and only father? What if Cesare repudiated the assertions of the first bull in which the paternity of the mysterious little John is attributed to him? The conclusion is irresistible: The mother of the Infant of Rome must have been a woman who had extended her favors to both the Borgia, the pope and his son Cesare. This circumstance alone eliminates Julia Farnese as the possible mother of the boy. It has also been maintained that the pope in providing two putative fathers for the boy merely sought to shield his daughter Lucrezia, who gave birth to an illegitimate male child in the time between the annulment of one marriage and her entry into another. Would such a course have had the effect of shielding Lucrezia?

As a matter of fact the two papal bulls have fastened upon her the greatest crime of her career; a crime the memory of which pursued her to the end of her days; a crime which she sought to expiate by the devotions and "pious works" of her old age. As the boy grew up he was constantly by Lucrezia's side. When she finally entered upon her last marriage and



left Rome never to return, she took the “Infant of Rome” with her to Ferrara, where she presented him to her husband as her youngest brother. Before she left she conferred with the pope as to the provisions that were to be made for her “family.” The pope had passed the three score and ten; his daughter was going away to spend the rest of her life away from him; it was evidently the right moment for a final adjustment which was to take care of her and those belonging to her.

Eleven days before the issuance of the two bulls, repeatedly referred to, the pope divided the confiscated estates of the two great Roman houses, the Colonna and Savelli, between Roderigo Borgia, the child born of the marriage of Lucrezia with the ill-starred Alfonso, and the “Infant of Rome.” The division was one of absolute equality. The “Infant of Rome” was created Duke of Nepi, and two cardinals were appointed as his guardians until he attained his majority. One would think that such generous provision ought to have satisfied both the pope and Lucrezia. However, the affection which they cherished for this child carried the pope further and induced him to issue the bulls by means of which the

child was secured against any disturbance in his rights and properties.

Let us once more look at the phraseology of the second and confidential rescript: "If in future the child is found to be designated as the offspring of Cesare in any papers or acts the rights of the said child shall not suffer thereby." This provision anticipated a possible intrigue or trickery on the part" of Cesare," The latter surely would not have hesitated in claiming or rejecting the paternity as it would best further his own interests. The pope was under no delusions as to the character of his son. He knew that he had murdered his own brother because the latter had stood in the way of his advancement. The "Infant of Rome" had been named after the murdered brother — another fact which surely is not without significance. Alexander had loved his first son John with idolatrous devotion. The little John revived the memory and the affection of the first favorite son.

The "Infant of Rome," in all probability, was begotten and born in the Vatican. When the pope, his feeble sense of shame deadened by the pride in the offspring of his old age, published the two bulls,

“Illegitime genitos” and “Spes futurae,” the “mysterious child” was in the care of Lucrezia. The lives of the pope, Cesare and Lucrezia in the Vatican were such as probably have never before nor since existed among three persons related as they were. There are details that are simply unprintable but which clearly showed a most unnatural intimacy between brother and sister and father and daughter. In all the debauches which have made the Borgia apartments infamous for all time, the pope always insisted in having Cesare and Lucrezia with him. His revolting antics on the night of one of Lucrezia’s marriages are a matter of history. Nor is there wanting the testimony of most credible contemporary witnesses. They all hint as strongly as they dared at incestuous relations in the Vatican. Leaving aside the avowed enemies of the Borgia and ignoring the rumors and satires of the street, we find the most fatal and damaging admissions in the pages of historians quite friendly to the house of Borgia.

What finally became of Lucrezia? She married the Duke of Ferrara and bore him several children. She never saw Rome or her father again. Speaking of her entry into a new home, the historian Gregorovius

says: "The daughter of the Borgia brought with her the memory of a painful past. Reports had preceded her which even if they had been unfounded would have thrown any noble minded woman into agonies of distress. She may have been glad to exchange Rome for less corrupt Ferrara, and here she outlived the fall of the Borgia. Few women in history have exercised so great a fascination on her contemporaries and on later generations as Lucrezia Borgia, who only required wider opportunities to become a second Cleopatra. The figure of the pope's daughter between her terrible father and brother, in part their tragic victim, in part a seductive siren and lastly a penitent Magdalen, exercises a charm on the imagination by the mystery which surrounds her and in the obscurity of which guilt and innocence struggle for supremacy, while in the background stands the ever interesting spectacle of the Vatican. As Duchess of Ferrara, Lucrezia Borgia renounced the passions of her early life. Like her mother, Rosa Vannozza, she gave herself up to devotion and works of Christian piety. She died on June 24, 1519. During all the years she spent at the court of Ferrara no one ever looked into her soul,

where it is hard to believe that the terrible spectre of her memory were ever laid to rest.”

## **Chapter VII**

### **A Borgia Tragedy**

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WHEN THE REMORSELESS SOUL OF THE BORGIA  
POPE WAS SHAKEN TO ITS DEPTH  
A MURDER MYSTERY WHICH IS STILL UNSOLVED  
THE “MAN IN THE MASK”  
WHAT THE FLOODS OF THE TIBER YIELDED UP ON A  
FATAL SUMMER’S NIGHT  
THE POPE FORGIVES THE MURDERER WHEN HE  
DISCOVERS THE TRUTH.

Often have I thought as I strolled about the Castel Sant’ Angelo and the bridge with the twisted Bernini figures, and the ancient place of executions on the right side of the Tiber, that the very air whispers of the past — of the magnificent emperor who built his own tomb by the Tiber’s muddy flood; of sieges and battles that were fought beside it when the bishops of Rome had converted the venerable ruin into a great fortress; of popes who found refuge there from the savage hatred of foreign mercenaries or from the just wrath of their own townsmen; of the

many tragedies the popes and cardinals had looked upon as they gazed on the scaffold across the water where their victims awaited the fatal blow of the axe or the noose of the hangman. Rome is full of dark and distressing memories but nowhere more so than where the Tiber makes its historic elbow toward the Gianicolo.

Almost within the shadow of the grim castle was committed the blackest of all the crimes of the house of Borgia — the one crime that shook even the remorseless soul of Alexander VI to its depths and drove him in fear and trembling from his chambers in the Vatican into the gray and dismal silence of this refuge in his favorite fortress. The crime itself is one of the unsolved mysteries of the ages. Only the facts themselves are eloquent and from them we must piece out our theories as to the guilty and their motives and as to the last moments of the victim. Let then the facts speak for themselves.

It was a summer's evening — one of those pleasant hours when the shadows of the June sun begin to lengthen and sweet scented breezes temper the heat of the day — greetings from the Alps or the sea.

Three Borgias sat at supper that evening: Juan Borgia, Duke of Gandia, and Cesare Borgia were the guests of their mother Rosa Vannozza, the avowed mistress of Alexander. The third in the company was, like Cesare a prince of the Church and a cousin of the other two — Cardinal Morneale. Young Gandia, raised to his ducal dignity by the Spanish monarch at the earnest prayer of Alexander, had just completed his twenty-fourth year. No human being of his time seemed to have a brighter future. He was closest to the heart of his father who had showered him with wealth, dignity and honors. The palace where the three were entertained still stands. You reach it by climbing the Salita de' Borgia and then from the Via Cavour walking up the stairs to the free open space where you will find the church of St. Peter in Chains and the Vannozza Palace standing directly across the square. The topography of the whole section shows clearly that it used to be the site of hilly vineyards by which the palace was then surrounded on all sides.

It was between eight and nine when the young Duke, beaming with happiness on the envious face of Cesare, left his mother's house saying he had



important business with the Spanish ambassador. The latter was then lodged in the Cancelleria, famous to this day for its wonderful cortile or courtyard. He was soon followed by Cesare. Gandia had come on muleback accompanied only by a groom and a person who is described as “the man with the mask.” This man had been steadily in his company for about a month or so. The full identity of this person has never been disclosed. Gandia, the groom and the mysterious servitor had arrived at the Piazza dei Giudei — an unwholesome and dangerous neighborhood, less than a stone’s throw from the river. Gandia dismissed the groom and the “mask,” telling them to wait for an hour and if he did not return to go back to the Vatican and report to his father. Gandia never returned.

The pope felt some alarm at the report of the servants, but he knew Gandia was fond of gallant adventures. Morning came and no news from Gandia. Rumors began to fly through the city. The thugs and spies in the employ of the bargello (director of public safety, let us call him) were sent out to find some trace of the beloved son. They discovered a coal heaver near the Ripetta, the great

landing for the vessels on the Tiber, which was then quite navigable. Right back of the church that stands on the Via Ripetta and the river you find to this day a lane called Vicolo dei Schiavoni — “the street of the Slavs.”

The Slavs seemed to control the coal trade and the man found by the “sbirri,” or papal policemen, was of that nationality. He said that about 1 o’clock on the morning of the 15th of June — the supper of the Borgias had been eaten on the 14th — he saw two men come out of the alley on the left side of the “Ospedale dei Schiavoni,” or Hospital of the Slavs, and with cautious steps approach the Tiber to a spot where people came to deposit garbage or throw it in the river. The men looked about them furtively as if afraid to be seen and then disappeared. In a few minutes two other men came in view, walked toward the same spot and, after cautiously peering about, gave a signal. Thereupon a rider on a white horse approached. “He carried a dead body, which was thrown across the horse, feet and legs on one side, head on the other. The rider went close up to the river’s edge, and then the companions took the body from the horse and threw it into the river with

all their might. The rider retired a bit and then asked the men whether they had done their work well, and when they said, 'yes,' he turned toward the river and saw the cloak floating on the water, and they all threw stones after it to make it sink." The man was asked why he had made no report to the authorities. His reply speaks volumes for conditions as they then existed in Rome. "In the eleven years I have been here," he said, "I have seen more than one hundred corpses thrown into the Tiber just like that and no one ever seemed to care."

In the meantime the groom had been found not far from the Piazza of the Jews. He had been attacked and mortally wounded. He could give no clue whatever to the fate of his master, though he was fully conscious and lived for several hours. The anxiety of Alexander now grew to frantic fear and apprehension. Scores of fishermen were drafted to drag the river, and after some hours the dead body of the young duke was found floating near the shore less than a mile from that fatal pile of garbage. The body was fully clothed, spurs and riding boots and all. A purse containing thirty ducats in gold was found in his pockets untouched. An examination

disclosed the terrible fact that the youth had been stabbed to death. No less than nine wounds were counted. There were stabs in the head, the throat, the thighs and the neck. The assassin or assassins had tied his hands behind his back and pitched him into the river.

When the gruesome discovery became known in the city the excitement of the populace passed all bounds. Everywhere the masses were surging through the streets, business was suspended, every store closed its doors. The crowds scarcely attempted to conceal their joy at this misfortune to the hated house. Spanish soldiers and gentlemen were seen passing up and down in the streets with drawn swords, crying and cursing. The body of the murdered youth was brought to the Castle in a barge and was then laid out in his uniform of a “captain of the church” and allowed to lie in state for several hours, if such a phrase can be used on such an occasion. The funeral took place at night — the uncoffined corpse, ghastly pale in the glare of the torches that led the way, was carried to Santa Maria del Popolo, the favorite church of the Borgia Pope, who had built an altar in the sacristy when the

church was in his charge as cardinal. There in the grave of his mother's family the poor youth was laid to rest, and up into the middle of the Eighteenth Century masses continued to be said there for the repose of his soul and that of his mother, who was buried in the same tomb many years later.

For five days Alexander locked himself in a room, tasting neither food nor drink and refusing to speak to any one. It is reported that at the sight of the mangled corpse of his favorite child he cried out that he knew the murderer. While a perfunctory search was made to discover the assassin, everybody in Rome suspected the truth. It was the jealous and iron-hearted Cesare who had caused the bloody deed to be done. There were rumors too abhorrent almost to be repeated that the older son of the pope was also jealous of the preference given Gandia by his sister Lucrezia. Whatever the facts may have been, all investigations were suspended two short weeks after the dreadful crime, when Cesare departed in haste for Naples.

For some time thereafter Alexander would not speak to Cesare either in public or in private. The pope proclaimed his intention to reform the church in

earnest and a decree was actually issued limiting the retinue of cardinals to eighty persons, but that was the extent of the reform.

When the first report with practical suggestions for the proposed measure was put in the hands of the pope he received it most indifferently, and soon the promise he made while under the influence of his first sorrow was completely forgotten. The cardinals were even less anxious about starting the reform than the pope himself.

Not long afterwards there was a complete reconciliation between the pope and the bloody fratricide. The two spent some days together hunting and traveling in the country near Rome. No doubt they came to an understanding, whether Cesare confessed or denied the commission of the crime. It has been observed by many historians that the influence of Cesare over his father began to grow after the death of young Gandia. In the last year of his life the will of Cesare prevailed in all matters of concern to the papacy, to the church and to the house of Borgia.



## Chapter VIII

### Souvenirs of the Borgia

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NUMEROUS RELICS AND MEMORIALS INTIMATELY  
ASSOCIATED WITH THE STORY OF THE BORGIAS  
GRUESOME EXHIBITS IN THE CASTEL SANT' ANGELO  
A STRANGE LEGEND OF THE "ROGUE'S LANE."

More than four centuries have passed since Alexander VI, the second of the Borgia Popes, unwittingly drank of the poison brewed by his bastard son and closed his career of unparalleled infamy. In any other country or city four centuries sweep away sacred landmarks and alter even the face of the earth. It is not so in Rome. There you may delve into any age from the days of Romulus to the reign of the last pope or king and with a little patience you can dig out your chapter of history and in fancy reanimate the scenes of long ago. The statue of Pompey, "which all the while ran blood," still stands. You can set out on any fine morning and follow the steps of Caesar on his flight into the mountains. Every emperor has left some vestige of



his power, and so has every pope. The yesterdays of Rome may be taken almost literally.

Numerous are the souvenirs of the Borgias. Of some of them I have spoken in other chapters, but all of them are interesting and valuable to the historian. Next to the Borgia apartments in the Vatican, mentioned elsewhere at some length, the one building richest in Borgia memorials is the famous Castel Sant' Angelo. Alexander, though he had not even a conscience in embryo, never ceased to dread the Roman populace. He constantly feared an uprising and took but little comfort in the small Spanish garrison that was lodged near the Vatican. He was haunted, too, by the fear of a foreign invasion, which, as events proved, was by no means groundless. Hence, he lavished much money and care on improving the fortifications which had been built around the ancient tomb of Emperor Hadrian by other popes before him. Until recently the straight street he built from the Castle to the Vatican was known as Via Alexandrina. It was Alexander who built the secret passageway between the Vatican and the fortress, for which so many of his successors were duly grateful. Substantial remains

of this passage way may still be seen in the Borgo Nuovo and within the walls of the castle itself. He took extreme care to prepare himself for a long siege, and to this day the guides point out the cisterns he built and the huge store rooms intended for the reception of grain and oil.

All the underground prisons with secret traps leading to the Tiber were constructed by Alexander. During his reign the frightful holes were always filled with his victims. It is worthy of note that none of his successors ever dispensed with these hideous torture chambers, but kept on using them even unto the day of Rome's final liberation from the papal yoke. Everywhere the Borgia coat-of-arms is in evidence. It was here in the grim pagan tomb, half fortress and half prison, that Alexander and his depraved offspring Cesare were wont to meet in safety and silence when they planned their murderous raids upon those nobles and churchmen whose wealth excited their envy. All the vast wealth he had accumulated by the sale of indulgences and offices and especially through dispensations and annulments of marriage bonds did not assuage Alexander's thirst for gold. Openly and without

pretense he seized upon the estates of wealthy men who died during his reign. He simply disregarded the last will and testament and the claims of relatives. Even these brazen robberies failed to content his avarice. "All Romans of means," writes a contemporary, "live in great fear and trembling and always see the hangman around the corner." The fortress became a shambles.

The cup of poison, the silken cord of the hangman, the dagger and the eternal bath in the rushing river claimed their victims day after day. This is not the place to record all the men who died in Sant' Angelo for no other crime than being rich, but their names alone would fill many a printed page.

Another well preserved relic of the Borgia is the former palace of the pope and his mistress, Rosa Vannozza, near the church in which are preserved the alleged chains of St. Peter. This part of Rome had undergone some changes in the early 70's, when a new street which was called the Via Cavour was laid out leading from the Central Railroad Station directly up to the northern side of the Forum. If you will start from the railroad depot down the Via Cavour, a walk of less than an eighth of a mile, will

bring you to a cross street, which still bears the name of Salita de' Borgia, or the Borgia ascent. Before the Via Cavour existed, this ascent, mostly steps of granite, was the main thoroughfare of the section, which had its other outlet toward the Colosseum.

Looking toward the Forum, turn to your left and you will see some distance above an arched passageway, the remains of the southern wing of the Palace of the Pope and later his mistress, Rosa Vannozza. You will see a window of obviously finer architecture giving upon the Via Cavour. Indeed the window and the balcony are as fine a bit of early Renaissance as may be found in Rome. In the palace the mistress of the pope, even after he had tired of her; kept a pretentious establishment and entertained the cream of Roman society. It was in her palace that the two Borgia brothers, Cesare and John, her own sons, sat at supper on the evening which later had such a tragic end for the younger of the brothers, as related in the foregoing chapter.

The steps which lead from the Via Cavour up to the remains of the old palace are known among the

people to this day as the Via Scellerata, or the Way of the Villain, or the Rogue's Lane.

There is a strange legend connected with the balcony. Popular tradition says, and is well confirmed by history, that the pope was a frequent visitor there, not so much to see his mistress as to watch over his children. It is said that when Lucrezia was scarcely seventeen, Alexander attempted to violate her in the room, the window of which still exists as shown in the picture. The story goes that in the struggle which followed, the pope moved too near the railing of the balcony and that the infuriated girl flung herself at him with full force, making him lose his balance and fall into the street. Still unable to control her anger, the girl watched her unnatural father as he lay prostrate and groaning on the pavement. She would not allow any help to be given him, but commanded that her carriage be brought out and then rode over the body of the pope, cursing him fiercely. The story, with an additional wealth of detail, passes current among the common people to this day. It is by no means improbable. When we recollect by what fiendish methods the father broke down the natural modesty

which is the birthright of every woman, the legend of his first attempt and its failure appears entirely credible.

The coat-of-arms of the Borgia is scattered all over Rome in great profusion. I have mentioned the conspicuous presence of two of the biggest on the walls of the Oratory of St. Peter, built by the Knights of Columbus. The name of the Borgia, too, is mentioned frequently in inscriptions in and out of churches.

In my walks about the city I found the most complete and interesting heraldic design of the Borgia under the Milvian Bridge (Ponte Milvio, or Ponte Molle). It is a finely carved bas-relief in rich red marble on the interior of the eastern wall. It represents three distinct parts: The coat-of-arms of Callixtus III, the first of the Borgia Popes and the uncle of the infamous Alexander; the coat-of-arms of Cardinal Roderigo Borgia, afterwards Pope Alexander VI, and the full coat-of-arms of the Borgia family as it still exists in Spain. The representation under the Milvian Bridge is the only one of its kind that exists in Rome. The reason for placing the bas-relief on the bridge is not known. Across the way

from the coat-of-arms is a space now vacant, but at one time evidently filled in by some inscription or commemorative tablet. All trace of this has disappeared.

In such inscriptions as may still be seen referring to either the older or the younger Borgia Pope, they are always spoken of as "Pontifex Maximus beatae memoriae" "Sovereign Pontiff of Blessed Memory."

One rather tragic and sinister memorial is that of the tomb of Cardinal Michiel, who, after having been bribed by Alexander to vote for him, later fell a victim to the fatal poison of the Borgia.

There still exists but little altered the palace which Borgia built for himself while a cardinal and where he kept his harem with little attempt at concealment. It is today known as the Palazzo Sforza-Cesarini.

## **Chapter IX**

### **Rome Still Honors the Memory of the Borgia**

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ROMANISM OF TODAY NOT ASHAMED OF ITS  
CRIMINAL POPE.

LEO XIII RESTORES BORGIA APARTMENTS

THE PLAGUE OF ROME AND THE VATICAN

BURIED BENEATH St. PETER'S AMONG CANONIZED  
POPES

QUESTIONS WHICH SHOULD BE ANSWERED BY THE  
"KNIGHTS OF COLUMBUS."

What has been the attitude of the Roman church toward the Borgias? Is she proud of them or ashamed? Some Romanist writers, almost all of them from the North of Europe, have admitted a series of unpleasant facts about the incestuous and unspeakable race. Some of Alexander VI's successors have denounced him. Indeed, the man who, after a few months, followed him on the papal seat, Julius II, would not even live in his apartments because he was sick of seeing the face of "that wretch, that circumcised Jew," on the walls. The



criticism did not address itself to the moral aspect of the case, could not in fact, for on that score Julius II in one respect was a good deal worse than even Alexander. Another pope, Urban VIII, more than one hundred and twenty-five years after Borgia, was annoyed at seeing the Castel Sant' Angelo covered inside and outside with the Borgia coat-of-arms, which were obviously in the way of his own. As he gave almost all of his time to politics and wanted the Pontifical State to be strong in arms he made great improvements in the old fortifications of the castle, in the course of which he undertook to leave his own coat-of-arms spread all over the premises. When he found how the Borgia Pope had forestalled him he had many of the latter's escutcheons defaced and even destroyed, as can be seen to this day.

Urban VIII, while still Cardinal Barberini, had been one of the keenest bidders for the properties that Clement VIII had stolen from the Cenci family.

Neither Julius II nor Urban VIII were in a strategic position to criticize their crooked fellow-pope. On the other hand, one of the more recent occupants of the papal chair, the ascetic and scholarly but fiercely intolerant Leo XIII, freely permitted the intertwining

of his coat-of-arms with that of the Borgias, when in 1891 he restored the Borgia apartments in the Vatican. He must have known what scenes had taken place there, how the things he believed to be most sacred on earth had been defiled and desecrated. Here the most horrible of all the Borgia debaucheries, the infamous “Dance of the Chestnuts,” had been performed; here not alone the dignity of the church but all the common decencies of life had been mocked night after night. What gain was there even from the artist’s viewpoint in restoring the infamous mysteries of Isis and Osiris, suggestive of that worship, when the people of Egypt prostrated themselves in obscene adoration before the bull Apio. Leo XIII must have known that these frescoes were made for no purpose but to honor the animal so prominent in the coat-of-arms of the two Borgia Popes. In the restored apartments the Borgia emblem is scattered over the six halls with sickening profusion. Some Roman Catholic soldiers of Charles of Bourbon, himself a Romanist, after the sack of Rome were lodged in the ill-famed rooms and destroyed what even to them must have seemed offensive. The scene of the orgies of

Alexander VI were well forgotten when Leo XIII revived their memories by restoring the apartments and writing the loathed name of Borgia alongside of his own.

We come back to the question: What is the attitude of the Church of Rome toward the Borgias? As an organization did the church ever take any action to show its detestation of the House of Borgia? No one can answer yes. Even in the so-called “Holy Year” (1925) when printing the pictures of popes who consecrated other “Holy Years,” the name and face of Alexander VI appeared as prominently as those of any other pope.

In the so-called grottoes of the Vatican beneath the aisles of St. Peter there is an impressive sarcophagus at once a coffin and a stately monument on which appears the name of Alexander VI. No one knows what is within the narrow walls; from what we know it is doubtful whether the remains of the papal monster are really there. In any event the placing of his tomb with such a name inscribed thereon shows that the Roman Catholic church thinks its former head worthy of a noble resting place in company with some of the popes that have been canonized.

In the Church of Santa Maria, in Monserrato, there is a monument in honor of both the Borgia popes, Callixtus III and Alexander VI. It was built and set up in the church less than fifty years ago. I have reproduced the monument in the text and offer it in evidence as an additional proof that popery and Romanism down to the present generation still honor the memory of the Borgias.

On the famous Leonine walls, to be exact above the walled in space where once appeared the Porta Cavalleggeri, there are two large emblems of the Borgias surmounted by the papal keys. Right back of these walls thus decorated with the marble souvenir of one of the worst popes and one of the worst men that ever lived is the oratory of San Pietro built by the American Knights of Columbus.

Maybe these noble and simple children of the pope have a feeling of veneration for the second Borgia because it was he who divided America between Spain and Portugal. Being engaged in the troublous task of making America Catholic, Alexander VI is perhaps a well chosen patron for their work. In any event the presence of two large escutcheons of Alexander VI on the very walls of their oratory makes

us put the question up to these same Knights of Columbus. Here is our simple inquiry, our modest request for information.

Why has the Roman church as a body and in an official way consistently refused to utter one word of condemnation or repudiation against Roderigo Borgia, known to history as Alexander VI? In her own teachings he was guilty of the most heinous of crimes imaginable. Why, through all the centuries since his death, do we listen in vain for the reproving voice of "Holy Mother Church" The pagan senate and people of Rome often endured the rule of depraved emperors, but after their death passed upon them the sentence of the "damnation of memory." The servants of the senate in such cases were ordered to destroy every vestige of the cruel or despotic prince. Why has the Roman church refused to do to Borgia what the Senate of Venice did to one of its faithless doges? A man who broke but one commandment seems a minor delinquent compared with Borgia. In the ducal palace of the old Republic among the pictures of its many rulers there appears a black space wherein are stated the shame and punishment of that unworthy servant of the people.

Why does Rome not follow that impressive example?

The great gallery of popes, real and mythical, that adorns the walls of St. Paul in Rome still shows the placid features of the arch-criminal of the ages between Innocent VIII and Pius III. Perhaps it is better so; at any rate it is more logical. The church which stubbornly upholds the verdict of a cruel death and a sentence to the fires of hell pronounced by this same Alexander VI against the “heretic” Savonarola cannot afford to say one word of censure against the orthodox Roderigo Borgia.

On the other hand, the church to this day maintains various practices and institutions introduced by Borgia. The “Index Expurgatorius” was an invention of Alexander VI and that “List of Forbidden Books” is as dear to Pius XI as it was to his precious predecessor.

Many of the prayers and practices in connection with the worship of the Virgin Mary were instituted by Borgia and are followed by the Roman Catholic church of today. Are we not justified then in believing that as far as any official action of the

“Holy Church” is concerned, Alexander VI is still a pope in good standing.

Many have been the cases where the church has opened the graves of men posthumously condemned as heretics and has turned the mouldering bones over to the executioner that he might burn them and scatter the ashes to the winds. In principle the church then admits her power, perhaps her duty, to sit in judgment even on the dead. If the papacy is a good institution and a benefit to the church; if the majority of the popes have been good men, then the Church of Rome owes it to itself to annul the election of Alexander VI as an offense to God and to strike the name of Borgia from the list of popes. Indeed, such a course has been proposed by several orthodox Romanist writers, but it has never elicited even a faint echo from those tightly closed windows up in the Vatican. Such a movement once started might leave other blank spaces in the pontifical roster and presently the whole institution of the papacy might appear to be a rather speckled and spotted affair.



**Alexander VI as he appears in the fresco of the “Resurrection” on the wall of the Borgia Apartments in the Vatican.**





**This portrait is part of the frescoes on the walls of the Borgia apartments in the Vatican. It is the picture of Francis Borgia, an illegitimate son of Pope Callixtus III and a first cousin to Alexander VI. He was made bishop by his father and a cardinal by his cousin.**



**A rare etching of Cesare Borgia, first born son of Alexander VI.**



**A bas-relief of the Madona and Child posed for by Rosa Vannozza and her infant Valentino, later Cesare Borgia of which Alexander VI was the acknowledged father. It was originally found in the church of San Salvatore in Termis and later removed to the National French Church (S, Luigide 'Francesi) , where it may still be found as a “miraculous Madonna” on the left hand corner of the high altar as the center of a little shrine.**



**Facade of the Church of San Salvatore in Termini where the bust of Cesare Borgia and the bas-relief statue of his mother Rosa Vannoza were found. The bust was taken out of the niche above the entrance while the bas-relief group was removed from the space between the two doors. Both the bust and statuette had before that occupied prominent places on the**

high altar of the church. Note the broken masonry marking the spot where the bas-relief stood before its final removal to the French church.



Profile of the bust of San Salvatore posed for by Cesare Borgia.





**The original of this bust was found in the Church of San Salvatore in Termis now destroyed. It is an open secret that Cesare Borgia the son of Pope Alexander had posed for it. Upon the the demolition of the church the bust disappeared, until it was rediscovered on the walls of the penitentiary of Civita Castellana near Rome.**



**Detail from frescoes on walls of Borgia apartments in the Vatican. The model for the Virgin and Child was Julia Farnese and her infant Laura of which Alexander VI was the acknowledged father. Julia was only twenty at the time and was idealized by the artist Pinturicchio.**



**Bust of the Savior posed for by Cesare Borgia. It was removed from the church of San Salvatore in Termis (now destroyed) to the monumental morgue of St. Louis' Church, where it may still be seen and is shown by the guide as the bust of "the relative of a famous Pope."**





**Detail from the fresco “Adoration of the Magi” painted on the walls of the Borgia apartments in the Vatican. The Virgin and Child, according to common belief, were posed for by Julia Farnese and her baby of which Pope Alexander VI was the acknowledged father.**



**Giulia Farnese, the famous Roman beauty, who was known as the Venus of the Vatican, the mistress of Alexander VI. Through her influence with Alexander she laid the foundations of her family’s great wealth and power. Her brother, Alexander Farnese, was made cardinal by Alexander VI, and afterward became pope as Paul III (1534-1549). After Alexander’s death her picture served as a model for the figure of justice, now close to**

the high altar of St. Peter's and part of the monument erected to the memory of Pope Paul III.



**Detail of the scene “The dispute of St. Catherine” painted on the walls of the Borgia apartments at the Vatican. The girl is Lucrezia Borgia, daughter of Alexander VI.**



**House of Rosa Vannozza, the first mistress of Alexander VI. It is located near the Campo de' Fiori now a rather low section of Rome but in**

**Alexander's day distinctly a residential neighborhood. Rosa Vannozza, also known as "Domina Rosa" or Lady Rose, was the mother of Cesare, Lucrezia and John Borgia and of two other children of the same father, Alexander VI. The house still shows traces of better days and a good style of architecture.**



**Models taken from the frescoes in the Borgia apartments in the Vatican. The girls are believed to have been taken from the "unlawful herd" of the Pope.**





**Detail from the frescoes in the Borgia apartments in the Vatican restored by Leo XIII in 1897. The frescoes were originally made by order of Alexander VI. This detail shows the idolatrous worship of the sacred bull Api. The bull is the dominant feature in the Borgia Coat-of-Arms.**



**Tomb of Cardinal Ascanio Scorza in the Church of S. Maria del Popolo. He sold his vote and that of three friends to Roderigo Borgia, insuring the latter's election.**

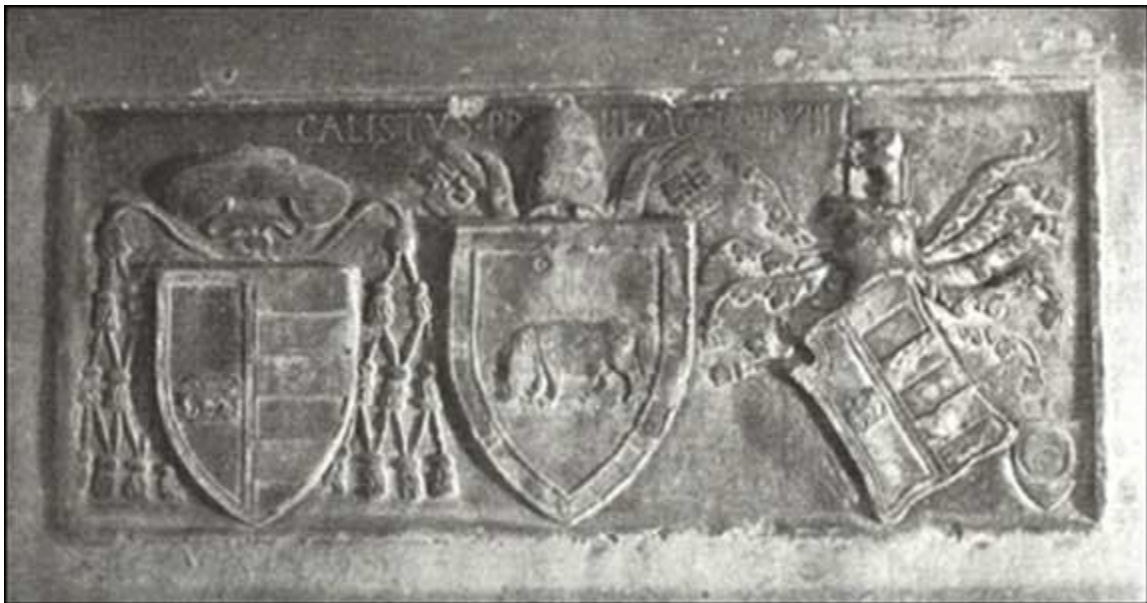


**Imposing tomb of Cardinal Michiel in the Church of San Marcello, one of the oldest Christian temples in Rome. Michiel was poisoned by order of Alexander VI. The manner of the cardinal's death was known to the artist, the famous Sansolima, who immortalized the memory of the crime**

**by showing the tortured position of the body in the center of the monumental group.**



**View of the Castle of the Borgia at Nepi in the Roman Campagna. The castle was given by Alexander VI to the mysterious “Infant of Rome” who was known as the Duke of Nepi.**



**A very rare photograph showing the three coats-of-arms of the Borgia: the papal emblem of Callixtus III, of the cardinal Roderigo Borgia,**



afterwards Alexander VI, and the family escutcheon of the Borgia. The whole group is cut into fine red marble in bas-relief under the tower of the Milvian Bridge (Ponte Milvio) on the left side of the Tiber.



**The Inner gate of the castle of Borgia at Nepi.**



**The ducal residence at Ferrara where Lucrezia Borgia spent the last years of her life in “pious meditations” and “works of charity.”**



Portrait of Cesare Borgia attributed to Rafael.



Cesare Borgia as cardinal.



**Lucrezia Borgia.**





**Detail from the fresco in the Borgia Apartments in the Vatican. The head is supposed to be that of Juan Borgia, Duke of Gandia, whose mysterious murder has been generally attributed to his elder brother, Cesare Borgia.**



**Remains of the secret passage between Castle S. Angelo and the Vatican.  
The picture shows the stairway leading to the secret passage.**





**View of St. Peter's and the Vatican from the roof of Castle S. Angelo. On the right note the remains of the secret passageways (corridors) between the Vatican and the old fortress designed and built by Alexander VI.**



**The Grand Cistern of Alexander VI in the Castle S. Angelo. Its remarkable state of preservation is due to the fact that it was sheltered by a little tree which stood in front of it until recent years. Note the Coat-of-Arms of Alexander VI perfectly intact.**



**A rare photograph showing the “Via Scellerata” or “Rogue’s Lane” passing from the Salita d’Borgia through the archway to the Church of St. Peter-in-Chains. Note the remaining bit of characteristic Renaissance architecture of the old palace of Alexander VI and later of his mistress Rosa Vannozza.**



**“Close-up” of two coats of arms of Alexander VI on Knights of Columbus oratory in Rome.**



**Lucrezia Borgia as Duchess of Ferrara**





**A well preserved part of the so-called corridor between the Vatican and the Castle S. Angelo, where the Pope frequently took refuge from foreign Invaders or domestic insurrection. The original “corridors” were built by Alexander VI and extended and improved by later Popes. Along these “corridors” were the houses of papal executioners long since leveled to the ground.**



**Partial view of the store rooms for grain and oil in Castle S. Angelo. These were ordered by Alexander VI, who thus prepared himself for a seige in case of an uprising by the people.**



**Monument to the Two Borgia Popes. Callixtus III and Alexander VI, erected in the Church of S. M. in Monserrato in 1883.**





**Another detail from the frescoes in the Borgia apartments of the Vatican.  
The scene refers to the idolatrous worship of the Egyptian deities Isis and  
Osiris.**



**Detail from the frescoes in the Borgia apartments in the Vatican. The frescoes were ordered by Alexander VI and restored by Leo the XIII in 1897. Detail shows the idolatrous worship of the bull Api. The bull was the dominant feature in the Borgia Coat-of-Arms.**



**Coats-of-Arms of Alexander VI on the outside wall of Castle S. Angelo. Note the defacement of the central part. It was an attempt of another Pope (Urban VIII) to obliterate the Borgia souvenirs in and around the castle. The attempt was a failure as will appear by other pictures.**



**Tomb of Alexander in the grottoes of the Vatican. Photograph by Alinari.**